DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 387 819 CS 215 087

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TITLE Encouraging International Perspectives through Collaborative Writing Assignments.

PUB DATE Apr 95

NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference on Language and Communication for World Business and the Professions (14th, Ypsilanti, MI, April 6-8, 1995).

PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Tests/Evaluation Instruments (160)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *Business Communication; *Business Education; Class Activities; *Communication Skills; *Cooperative Learning; Global Approach; Graduate Study; *Group Activities; Group Dynamics; Higher Education; International Communication; *Writing Assignments

IDENTIFIERS Bloomsburg University PA; *Collaborative Writing; International Business Education

ABSTRACT

The administrative communications course at Bloomsburg University has dual goals: to improve written and oral communication skills and to improve global business communication skills. Thus an opportunity exists to create projects that require graduate students to learn about other countries and other peoples. A project--writing a business plan for starting a business in a foreign country--was developed and tested in 1994 and 1995. The project can be adapted to a variety of other graduate courses depending on instructor emphasis. With collaborative projects, broad topics can be assigned without sacrificing depth. And of course collaborative writing methods are also taught. Upon completion of the course, students are expected to be able to: (1) gather, interpret and organize information; (2) write effect objectives, abstracts, reports and proposals; (3) present a long, cooperative oral presentation; and (4) use technology to enhance communication effectiveness. The procedures and guidelines for setting up the project are crucial. For instance, the instructor should choose the teams because when left to themselves, students will form groups according to convenience or level of competence. i.e., poor students will form groups with other poor students perhaps because they feel comfortable working together. Evaluation procedures can also make a considerable difference in outcomes; process and product evaluation are recommended. The process evaluation includes minutes from all group meetings, individual student logs documenting individual contributions, and confidential evaluations by fellow team members. Product evaluation includes grading a final written report, an oral report, letter and memo heads, and the sales letter. (Appendixes include project guidelines, a student questionnaire, and a team evaluation form.) (TB)

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ENCOURAGING INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES THROUGH COLLABORATIVE WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

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Most entering graduate students in our programs have little knowledge of the skills or information needed to operate in the international business world. Therefore, international business is a major component of our MBA and a minor component in our M.Ed. graduate programs.

Administrative Communications

The Administrative Communications course at Bloomsburg University has dual goals: to improve written and oral communications skills and to improve global business communication skills. Thus an opportunity exists to create projects that require students to learn about other countries and other peoples.

Collaborating on a International Business Plan

A project, writing a business plan for starting a business in a foreign country was developed and tested in 1994 and 1995. This project can be adapted to a variety of other graduate courses depending upon instructor emphasis. The collaborative project uses the unique skills of each team member to provide a substantial base of information from which to draw. With collaborative projects, broad topics can be assigned without sacrificing depth. And of course, collaborative writing methods are

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also taught. The project can even cross course disciplines when two or more teachers cooperate in their assignments.

Communication Goals. Upon completion of the course, students should be able to:

1. gather, interpret, and organize information.
2. write effective objectives, abstracts, reports, memorandums, and proposals.
3. present a long, cooperative, oral presentation.
4. use technology to enhance communication effectiveness.
5. collaborate in writing and presenting a long, complex report assignment.

International Goals. Upon completion of the course, students should:

1. gain a greater appreciation for the culture of another country.
2. gain experience interacting with individuals from another culture. This may include people who don't speak English expertly.
3. learn the sources of international information, including standard references, computerized reference materials, the internet, and non-traditional sources of information.
4. use resources available to them from U.S. government sources.
5. use resources available to them from other countries.
6. gain an understanding of the nature of bureaucracies in other countries.

Managing the Project

The class is taught as a seminar with some lecture and much discussion, meeting for three hours one night a week for a semester. The instructor also

individually tutors individuals or teams as the need arises. Most course topics are tied directly to the project. This close interaction between instructor, team and course work is necessary for the successful completion of this project. Sometimes the class must be provided with more direction, sometimes prodded to accomplish goals. Considerable class time is devoted to team discussions.

Determining Team Structure

While the team leader is responsible for utilizing the members skills to best advantage, composition of the teams is crucial to the success of the project. Experience has shown that left to themselves students will sort themselves by ease of meeting or by competence. Neither seems to yield optimum results for the class as a whole. Poor students invariably choose other poor students as team members, perhaps because they feel more comfortable working together. The most effective teams for a project of this size include individuals with a variety of skills and abilities. This can only be accomplished when the teacher forms the teams.

Gathering Student Data. The first day of class, survey class members to determine what skills they will bring to the project. As can be seen on form X, some course planning information is also gathered. After reviewing this material, sort students into teams. Most students seem to have sufficient computer and work experience, but many are weak in statistical and writing experience. Online skills or electronic mail skills vary considerably. The ideal team, of course, has a resident expert for each of these areas.

Setting Up the Teams. Team size depends on class size, but four or five member teams seem to work most effectively. Smaller teams do not benefit as much from the team structure. Few leadership skills or delegation are practiced because small teams seem to act as a committee of the whole. Larger teams, despite accountability measures, allow some team members to avoid work while profiting from the work of others.

Introducing the Project

The second week of class, teams are announced and the project introduced. Typically students are enthusiastic, if a bit overawed at the magnitude of the project. They are given just two deadlines, the due date for the proposal and final report, as time management is a responsibility of the team.

Get Acquainted, then Focus. When teams meet for the first time during class, the instructor can help the teams get off to a good start. After chairs have been moved, the team have practiced their business handshakes, and introduced themselves, talk can frequently degenerate into social chitchat or academic counseling. This is a good time for the instructor to take momentary control of the class. A transparency like the one in figure 1 showing a series of tasks to be undertaken immediately helps to focus energy on the project.

WORKING PROCEDURES

1. Decide on the type of business the team wishes to operate.
2. Decide on the role of the team members. Who is going to be team leader and who will be the VP's.
3. Decide on market country. Get approval from instructor.
4. Outline the kinds of information you will have to obtain.
5. Consider the possible sources of this information.

Figure 1

Achieve Closure. When the instructor determines that most groups are deep into a discussion of resources or, on the other hand, have no idea where to start, bring the class back for general discussion and brainstorming. End this session with a discussion-generated list of topics for team dialogue and research.

Evaluating Outcomes

In Administrative Communication, international projects represent 60 percent of each student's grade. The other forty percent consists of individual projects and tests of other topics covered in class.

The collaborative international project spawns a number of other smaller assignments, both collaborative and individual. For example, each team must produce a sales letter, letter and memorandum headings for use in the project, an interview schedule for hiring employees, while each individual must write a short report on the types of materials available outside the university. Other course titles could generate

other assignments. For example, marketing majors might present a complete marketing plan. Advertising majors might write an advertising campaign. Or finance majors might write a financial plan.

Individual writing assignments not only provide the instructor with information about the quality of student writing, but also help to determine the quality of team interaction. Naturally, the best writers contribute more to their team's writing efforts, but when the team is working well, the project will reflect the strengths of each individual team member. With a project like this, instructors work so closely with teams, that they **can** evaluate the quality of team interaction.

Evaluating Collaborative Efforts

The number of process and product evaluations possible in this project provides a high degree of confidence in grade determination.

Two types of evaluation provide the best base for individual grades: Product evaluation and process evaluation. The first time the project was used, each team was responsible for submitting a report detailing their evaluation strategies. While this procedure worked fairly well, the effort required too much time. Data collection for process evaluation needs to be collected immediately upon the beginning of the project.

Process Evaluation. Currently, the following data must be submitted: minutes of team meetings, individual student logs detailing independent effort, and confidential evaluations by fellow team members. Each class meeting a folder is available so that the most recent approved minutes can be filed with the instructor. Reading these

minutes helps the instructor monitor team efforts, provide any necessary help, and intervene when things are not going well. Of course, the minutes provide writing practice, as well as requiring students to learn correct minute format.

At the end of the project, student logs are collected, but evaluations are mailed to the instructor. Mailing evaluations frees team members from peer pressures or embarrassment. The only people who don't mail in their team evaluations are those who have contributed little to the team effort. Other team members frequently rate these individuals very low. Perhaps the mixture of accountability measures and the importance of the assignment to individual grades cause individuals to be unusually honest in their evaluations.

Product Evaluation. International project team products which are graded include: final written report, oral report, letter and memo heads, and the sales letter. Although the team may have appointed an individual to create all or part of these assignments, all members will suffer if one individual falls performs the assignment badly. Of course, all members will benefit if the assignment is performed very well. The intent here is to force the team to take responsibility for their team's work, evaluating their own products before the instructor grades it.

Experience has shown that the quality of oral reports varies more than the quality of written reports. Variables include planning, production of appropriate visuals, practice time and the past experience of team members. Since all team members must take part in the oral presentation, inexperienced speakers can ruin an otherwise good presentation.

For this reason, both a team grade and an individual grade are given. If the oral report was given earlier in the semester, the instructor could legitimately require that the team enforce performance standards. But since the oral report comes at the end of the semester, not enough practice time exists. Having two grades is a compromise which places responsibility both on the team and on the individual.

The individual grade serves notice that weak performers cannot be entirely carried by strong performers. However, the effect on the final grade is more psychological than practical. Individual oral grades count very little.

Evaluating the International Business Plan

After using the collaborative project three times, some general observations can be made.

1. The project motivates Administrative Communications students in a manner that other teaching methods did not.
2. The project helps to make other topics relevant; therefore, few restrictions on additional course topics result from using the project.
3. Students tend to overlook cultural differences and infrastructure differences unless specifically mentioned in sources related to their product.
4. The interaction within the team determines the quality of the work performed.

APPENDICES

International Project

Student Questionnaire

Team Evaluations

INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

A PROJECT FOR ADMINISTRATIVE COMMUNICATIONS

Each team shall create a business. The business may be manufacturing, sales, or service. Choose one in which someone in the group has experience. You will create a business name and appoint officers.

President:	Team Leader, develops a time line, assigns responsibilities.
First Vice President:	Records Administrator, keeps minutes.
Second Vice President:	Marketing Specialist, supervises the creation of letterhead, memohead, and visuals for presentation.

The team leader may appoint additional officers if desired.

An opportunity has arisen to expand your business internationally. Choose a country where you think there are business opportunities for your company.

Decide what types of information is needed to judge the feasibility of operating in this country. One of the topics, of course, will be communication networks or channels between the home office and the new international branch.

Each team must develop an efficient working procedure if the task is to be manageable. Planning will make this project much easier for all team members, but responsibilities need to be made clear and individuals held accountable for their contributions. Communication channels need to be established. Electronic mail connections through the internet or through Starmail can be established. Contact Academic Computing to open electronic mail accounts. Electronic mail on either forum can be accessed in the Sutliff computer labs.

When the team has decided what they plan to do, a proposal should be written and submitted to me which describes the team's planned efforts. By submitting this proposal, the you can receive feedback on the appropriateness of your plans, and receive suggestions for improvement.

The project will culminate in a written report and an oral presentation of one-hour. Assume the class is a venture capitalist who can fund the expansion or refuse to fund it. You'll have to present some information about your business as well as about your expansion plans. The length of the presentation means that you have to present information in such a manner that maintains the interest of the class. Attractive visual

aids need to be prepared. These need to be very professional.

The proposal, oral report, and final written report will be graded. These grades, however, may be modified for individuals based on the accountability measures used by the team.

Requirements

Letterhead and Memo Stationery

Written Minutes for Each Formal Meeting of the Whole Team

Personal Logs

Proposal Report

Visuals for Oral Report: Illustrations, Diagrams, Videos, etc.

Final Written Report: Full analytical report including title page, letter of transmittal, table of contents, executive summary, body of the report, bibliography, and appendices.

The bibliography should include references for general information about the country and its culture, general information about international business, and specific information about operating a business in that culture.

Oral Report

Administrative Communications
STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What is your major at Bloomsburg University?
   ____ MBA ____ med ____ Other

2. Have you taken formal coursework in business communications?
   ____ yes ____ no If no, go to question No. 7

3. What was the course entitled?
   ____ Business Communications
   ____ Managerial Communications
   ____ Other (please specify) _____

4. Where did you study business communications?
   ____ Bloomsburg University ____ Other (please specify _____

5. How long ago did you study business communications?
   ____ 1 - 3 years ago ____ 3 - 5 years ago ____ longer than 5 years ago

6. How many weeks were given to the study of formal reports?
   ____ less than two weeks
   ____ 2 - 3 weeks
   ____ 4 - 8 weeks
   ____ most of the semester

7. Can you use the following software? Circle your degree of confidence.
   Number 1 is low and indicates acquaintanceship only, 3 indicates that you are very comfortable with the program.

____ WordPerfect 5.1	1	2	3
____ WordPerfect 5.0	1	2	3
____ Lotus 1, 2, 3	1	2	3
____ Harvard Graphics	1	2	3
____ PageMaker	1	2	3
____ Microsoft Word	1	2	3
____ Other Presentation Software (please specify)			
_____	1	2	3
_____	1	2	3
____ SPSS (a statistical package)	1	2	3
____ Other pertinent software (please specify)			
_____	1	2	3
_____	1	2	3

8. Have you taken any coursework in statistics?
   ____ yes, as an undergraduate ____ no, I haven't
   ____ yes, as a graduate student

9. List your work experience.
   a. Full-time

   b. Part-time

TEAM EVALUATIONS

PERSON EVALUATED: _____

EVALUATOR: _____

PART I

Poor	Fair	Average	Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

Based on the above scale, circle the number that best identifies the team member's performance.

1.	Provided creative input	1	2	3	4	5
2.	Accepted tasks willingly	1	2	3	4	5
3.	Completed required tasks successfully	1	2	3	4	5
4.	Met deadlines	1	2	3	4	5
5.	Attended group meeting	1	2	3	4	5

PART II

Complete the following items.

6. Did the team member meet your expectations in terms of his/her responsibilities? Explain.

7. How did you feel the team member cooperated with the group?

8. What do you feel the team member should receive fora final grade?